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- Saved
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- Cities
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- Entertainment
- Editorials
- Web Stories
- Cricket
- Videos
- Trending
- Coronavirus
- Lifestyle
- World News

Home / Entertainment / Others / Cannes Film Festival 2021: Jane by Charlotte is a daughter's ...

OTHERS

Cannes Film Festival 2021: Jane by Charlotte is a daughter's love letter to her mother

Charlotte Gainsbourg is a festival regular with many of her films with having had a Cannes opening. With Jane by Charlotte, she returns as a director of her biographical documentary.

By HT Entertainment Desk
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Jane by Charlotte is a documentary by Charlotte Gainsbourg.

Charlotte Gainsbourg came into this writer's view with Danish director Lars Von Trier's highly controversial Antichrist, and this was followed by his Nymphomaniac, another brutal work with her by an auteur who has been often described as Europe's 'Enfant Terrible'. Nymphomaniac, five hours and thirty minutes long, shocked the media at Cannes, where it premiered in 2013. In fact, many of Charlotte's films have had a Cannes opening – including Antichrist, Melancholia, The Tree and Persecution.

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This year, she is back at the festival not as an actress but as a director with her biographical documentary Jane by Charlotte – which is on her mother Jane Birkin, who is an English actress and singer. The work is part of the festival's official sections.



Jane Birkin is an well-known English actress and singer.

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Charlotte told the press that she had a selfish motive in making the movie – which comes 37 years after the younger woman had been playing a singer and performer. She wanted to spend a lot more time with her mother than she had ever done. “I needed to get close to her, and I couldn’t without an excuse.... So the excuse was to get a team together and ask her if I could film her. The idea was to be able to look at her really with the eye of a daughter.”

What came out of this loving gaze was a very personal documentary. Jane by Charlotte strips layers out of the mother's life – as an artist, a wife and a parent. The work is daring, much like the kind of roles that 49-year-old Charlotte had done in, for instance, Antichrist, Nymphomaniac and even Melancholia.

Interestingly, Charlotte seems to have taken after her parents in her gutsy ventures. Remember she is the daughter of a much celebrated marriage between Jane and French actor-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg, whose suggestive 1969 duet 'Je t'aime ... moi non plus' got the Vatican all ruffled up but the French people loved the couple, for they appeared to be the harbingers of a sexual revolution which had begun to evolve then.



Charlotte Gainsbourg is known for her work in films like Antichrist, Melancholia, The Tree and Persecution.

Yet, in some ways, Charlotte is very unlike Jane, whose ravishing beauty inspired a brand like Hermes – their handbags in particular. But Charlotte does not seem to care about this; she shows her 74-year-old mother in baggy clothes, cooking for her granddaughter. “In France, a lot of the footage that happened in the '70s, where my parents were together, everybody has seen,” Charlotte avers. “Everybody has an image of her in those years. I didn’t want to have these beautiful but stereotyped images of her. I wanted her today. I didn’t care about what people knew of her or what they wanted to see of her. It was done in a very, very selfish way for my own pleasure.”

Charlotte now lives in Paris with her long-time companion, Israeli-French actor-helmer Yvan Attal, and their three children. They are not married, much like her own parents, who never did.

Charlotte loved her first stint with the megaphone. The experience was highly fulfilling.”But I’m not sure I’d be able to do a thriller or any genre work. I have to fall in love with a story that would be very close to my own feelings.”

The documentary also refers to the tragic death of Jane's eldest child, fashion photographer Kate Barry, in 2013. It was an apparent suicide, and Jane had the child by her first husband, English composer John Barry. This angered Charlotte, who felt that Jane had not been a good mother.

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It took many years for Charlotte to realise that she was wrong about her mother, and Jane by Charlotte may well be a way of saying sorry and an unmistakable declaration of her love for the older woman.

Charlotte's parents divorced in 1981, and Serge died in 1991. But Charlotte has included her father's legacy in her movie. The camera takes us to his Paris home, which Charlotte plans to transform into a museum.

“In France, he's so well-known,” Charlotte says. “He belongs to everyone. The only thing that was still mine and only mine was his house. I'm not able to go to the cemetery because there are always a lot of people there. I'm able to go to his house and shut the door and just be there for him and for myself. So it means putting an end to that, but I think it's much needed after 30 years. I have to do it.”

(Written by Gautaman Bhaskaran)

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